DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 730 SP 038 591

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TITLE Staff Development in Cooperative Learning for Inservice Teachers.
PUB DATE 1999-04-23
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Cooperative Learning; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; *Faculty Development; Inservice Teacher Education; Program Evaluation; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Improvement

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study of six teachers in a metropolitan public elementary school investigated the structure and process of staff development for inservice teachers who were incorporating cooperative learning into their classroom practices. The researcher collected data from planning meetings, site visits with observations, questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus group discussions. The project lasted 1 school year, with data collected before, during, and after staff development sessions that were designed to help teachers implement cooperative learning. Information came from both teacher self-report data and observations from researchers. Data analysis indicated that teachers considered the staff development program successful because it impacted their students both within their classrooms and at recess. They believed that the inservice training addressed their specific goals. Teachers learned both from group facilitators and from one another. However, there were situations where teachers' lack of a theoretical overview caused them to think in short-sighted ways and make decisions that conflicted with one another. Other areas of concern included time pressures that teachers faced and long-term support for the effort. (Contains 36 references.) (SM)

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Staff Development in Cooperative Learning for Inservice Teachers

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the

American Educational Research Association

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April, 1999

SP038859

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Purpose and Objectives

This paper investigates the structure and process of staff development for inservice teachers. The form of research is an ethnographic case study of six teachers in a metropolitan public elementary school who are incorporating cooperative learning into their classroom practices. The goal of the study is to identify and describe staff development factors that help and hinder their attempts.

The school reflects the diversity of urban America. There are both new immigrants and others whose ancestry already contains several generations of U.S. citizens. Many are permanent residents of the community, but over half are military dependents who usually live only one to three years near a school, then are transferred elsewhere. In working with a population of whites, blacks, various Asian ethnicities, and others, the teachers' challenge is to successfully integrate all, both academically and socially. Cooperative learning helps do so, but how best to design and carry out staff development for a variety of teachers at different grade levels? Should the content also be the process of instruction during the inservice program? How should planning and implementation occur?

Most research on cooperative learning focuses on the students. This one emphasizes the change and growth of teachers in the search to improve their ability to support the students' educational progress by helping them work together.

Theoretical Framework

How can we best provide the initial and continuing education and support for teachers who want to use cooperative learning in their classrooms? This is the function of professional staff development. If cooperative learning is the desired curriculum, then staff development is the teachers' instructional opportunity.

According to several authors (Orlich, 1989; Harris, 1989; Joyce & Showers,

1995), the definition of staff development includes collaborative, group, and/or cooperative processes. Cooperative learning is a means, and in the case of the teachers in the study, an end as well. Thus, the process used is a model for the desired outcome.

Within organizational theory, it is a loosely coupled, or open system that allows for the most cooperative interaction. This model is supported by Johnson and Johnson (1989), and also by Morgan (1986). Such an organization supports the flow of information among students, teachers, administrators, other staff, parents, and community members. Social systems theory emphasizes the importance of human interaction, encouraging democratic interaction and open communication in order for meaningful dialogue and problem solving to take place. As opposed to the traditional bureaucratic model, both open and social systems theories propose more interactive models, fostering communication in all directions and among all stakeholders (Hanson, 1991).

Democratic models also parallel both the process and desired outcomes of cooperative learning inservicing, and have been advocated by many for decades (Courtis, McSwain, & Morrison, 1937; Dewey, 1937; Morgan, 1986; Lyman & Foyle, 1990; Sharan, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1994). These are not mutually exclusive, for democratic practices work well in support of open and social systems in particular.

Regarding staff development factors which may affect the success of a project, a variety of authors all advocate thorough planning of the staff development process from beginning to end. Gibbs (1994, p. 198) says that effective staff development requires the why, what, and how: the theoretical rationale, then the curriculum and instruction model. Joyce and Showers (1995) also stress the importance of focusing on particular goal(s) and making sure that both enough practice and peer coaching support are available to increase the likelihood of success.

Methodology

This is a multiple case study of six teachers in the same elementary school, with two second-grade teachers, and one each in grades three, four, five, and six. The study uses evidence from a variety of data-gathering methods, including planning meetings, site visits with observations, questionnaires, many individual interviews, and a few focus group discussions. The project lasted for one school year, with data collected before, during, and after the staff development sessions all designed to help the educators implement cooperative learning. It includes teacher self-report data, plus observations from the author and two others who visited the teachers' classrooms. The various methods, length of the study, and use of multiple observers provide checks on the accuracy of the data. This was primarily a qualitative study, though some quantitative data was collected. It was organized in such a way to allow the cases to tell their stories, both individually and collectively.

The use of case studies as a method is explained by Stake (1988): "the principal difference between case studies and other research studies is that the focus of attention is the case...the search is for an understanding of the particular case, in its idiosyncrasy, in its complexity" (p. 256). The use of a multiple cases offers an advantage, as Yin (1989) notes: "the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust" (p. 52). Stake (1978) argues that the value of case studies lies in how well they can generalize for the reader: "case studies will often be the preferred method of research because they may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader's experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization" (p. 5).

The inclusion of focus groups allows the researcher to view the interaction of a group of teachers as a collaborative team, something not possible through the study of individual cases alone. In addition, paralleling the focus on cooperative

learning during the inservices, it allows the participants to interact with and learn from each other. As Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 16) observe, "Focus groups allow respondents to react and build upon the responses of other group members. This synergistic effect of the group setting may result in the production of data or ideas that might not have been uncovered in individual interviews." Focus groups must have a clear purpose; they are not aimless discussions. Krueger (1994, p. 16) defines their goal, which is to: "provide data from a series of focused discussions".

The researcher himself was, on occasion, asked for ideas and possible solutions to classroom challenges, and chose to offer suggestions. As the evaluation was for the purposes of improving the inservice facilitators' program, and formative in design, the researcher maintained integrity, acting with the permission of all involved. By doing so, the researcher became, in effect, a small part of the inservice staff as well. There is no pretense about total objectivity here. The author has a bias in favor of cooperative learning, and preferred to be in a position where he could act as a supportive aide, rather than just an impartial observer. In noting this role, it does not negate the accuracy of the observations or quotations included. The teachers and their students actions speak with their own voices.

There are limitations. Case studies can be subject, at least in part, to the researcher's selective subjectivity. The use of triangulation may help mitigate the effect of any bias.

The Cases: Six Teachers

The educators shared their views regarding staff development, with some thoughts in common among them, though there were also individual differences. Of the six, five were females and one was male, with an age range from mid-twenties to mid-forties, and teaching experience varying from just a couple of years to nearly two decades. Their experience and goals regarding the uses of cooperative

learning in the classroom also varied widely. The following names I use for them are pseudonyms.

Linda - "Getting Started and Shifting Gears". Linda, the teacher with the least experience implementing cooperative learning, was interested but uncertain. Having her students learn to work together appealed to her philosophically but the implementation in the classroom seemed a mystery at first. She didn't know where to begin, and wanted to see effective models, so she knew how to proceed. In her first interview, she indicated the type of inservice help she wanted: "Demonstrations or walk throughs help, because I want to see how it works. Then I understand the 'fun' that goes along with it. I know what enthusiasm is possible." Linda asked for ongoing feedback: "I'll want to watch a video of my class so I can 'see' and analyze the positives and negatives of each...session." This was still true in her last interview: "I would like an experienced observer to watch [me] or another expert to give [me] opinions, help, and suggestions." Linda wanted coaching, which is essentially an example of cooperative learning, whether by peers or (in this study) by those hired to give the inservices.

Katrina - "Developing Responsibility". Katrina, who taught second grade, wanted to teach her students how to become more responsible. As the year progressed, she wanted help in learning how to delegate authority for decision-making and completing tasks to her students. While Katrina gained some ideas from her peers and the inservice leaders, she was more interested in sharing an overall perspective about the staff development. She hoped that the whole faculty would become involved, as well as the parents, staff, and community: "It would work if all used [cooperative learning]." She saw progress in her own room, but she hoped for more. The cadre of six teachers was a start, but the school wasn't unified, and that would have been best. As in a fable she had read to her students, Katrina wanted everyone in the school to recognize that "united we stand".

Carol - "It's Their Class". Carol, a third-grade teacher, wanted all of her students to feel like they belonged, and were important members of the classroom family. With that goal in mind, she asked for ideas to create a positive learning environment in which all participated, developing an atmosphere of trust and support. She also shared how important the same model was in her own development, as she felt a member of a larger extended family. In working toward improving her own capabilities at improving student cooperation, she felt supported by the inservice staff, and also by her fellow teachers and the administration, as well as her own students. But Carol also hoped for more involvement from another important stakeholder: "I think the students really need the support, modeling and reinforcement constantly in school (teachers and staff) but also at home from their parents! If we could give them the background of what [cooperative learning] is...have [inservice staff] come and talk to the parents, explain how they can support it at home. I don't think that some of the kids use it at home."

Doris - "Guidance Toward Adulthood". Doris switched to elementary school after many years as an adult educator. She saw her role as a fifth grade teacher as that of a facilitator, leading her students in beginning the change from child to adult. To help her learn, Doris wanted specific help: "I'd like to see them model lessons, with real kids if possible, then I could ask questions afterwards. Or maybe the staff could go into my class and model for me." She was mostly interested in developing the social skills of her students, so they could more effectively interact and work with one another. In this, she was a little mystified at times, because the former emphasis of the inservice facilitators was shifting. Prior to the year of the study, the few introductory inservices had focused strictly upon social skills development, and now social skills were being taught as a small component within the larger framework of cooperative learning. Doris was still more interested in the former

alone, so the shift in emphasis meant that the inservice sessions were less relevant for her than she had hoped they would be.

Kevin - "Real World Preparation". The lone male and a sixth-grade teacher, Kevin emphasized group projects that he felt would prepare his students for working with others in teams in different jobs they might hold as adults. For example, he had them build rockets in class, then they launched them together. For another unit, each group was given a hypothetical bank account for its construction company, then required to buy materials, plan, and build a bridge, while staying within budget. At first, he wanted to see "modeling of different lessons, [and] also for the group to do some brainstorming and sharing of ideas." By the end of the year, he wanted "guidance as far as integrating cooperative learning structures within the context of my curriculum." He still wanted to talk and share ideas, and felt that the past sharing of problems and brainstorming solutions with the group had been helpful. For Kevin, the group of peers and inservice facilitators together functioned like a supportive cooperative learning group.

Shelly - "Solving Problems for Learning". Shelly, Katrina's second grade colleague, was interested in teaching her students how to solve problems, both for interpersonal conflicts, and in academics. Her goal was to create greater individual self-sufficiency, thus delegating minor difficulties so there was more time for teaching and learning. She always wanted new ideas, updates on research and current materials as resources. Shelly also hoped for greater school-wide adoption of this goal, so fewer outside conflicts would carry over into the classroom: "I'd like to see [problem-solving] training for the lunch supervisors and other educational aides, so that when problems occur, there's 'teaching' involved. I'd also like it if the entire support staff and faculty are on the same wavelength with problem solving for the students."

Data Analysis

Evidence from the data indicate the wisdom of careful planning and support at the outset. Both financial and political support are needed, and the development of a shared vision among those involved. Ideally, involvement of all teachers would exist. But voluntary participation in such a program is preferable to forced attendance, which may breed resentment and resistance. Implementation of staff development includes models and demonstrations of lessons, so that teachers may see how the ideas work in practice. They don't have to start from scratch and guess how best to translate theory into classroom implementation. Working with teachers as a group helps create unity and team support, both in the sessions and beyond to everyday school interaction. They know that they are not alone.

It would have been better still (as many of the teachers expressed) to have not only all teachers, but all stakeholders, involved in the inservice sessions. In an ideal situation, support staff (such as aides, office workers, custodians, cafeteria employees, etc.), parents, community members, and administration would all participate in both the training and implementation of the program. This is consistent with the overlapping concerns of an open system. But as with faculty involvement, a voluntary group is preferable than forced attendance, which results in subversion and resentment. Hopefully, an enthusiastic cadre will spread the word, and positive techniques will be implemented by others.

Generally, the teachers felt that the staff development program was a success. It impacted their students both within their classes and at recesses. They felt that the important ideas were practical ones, specific examples on how they might apply cooperative learning in their classes. But this author found examples of situations where the teachers' lack of a theoretical overview at times caused them to think in more short-sighted ways, occasionally making decisions that conflicted with one another. An example of this is gradually delegating more authority and

responsibility to students working together in groups, but retaining teacher control and arbitrary decision-making in the settling of student interpersonal conflicts. Self-sufficiency in academics was being taught, more than self-control in behavior. Still, if defined as support for helping the teachers achieve the goals they had set for themselves, the inservices succeeded. All of the teachers agreed that the sessions helped them improve in the areas selected by themselves. With the exception of Doris, for whom the shift from specific social skills training to the more all-encompassing topic of cooperative learning in general was an undesirable expansion, all felt that the staff development inservices specifically addressed their goals.

Other areas of concern include time pressures and long-term support. It was difficult for teachers to make extra time in an already busy schedule to meet and plan and discuss, over and above what was already a hectic lifestyle for all. Looking to the future, the funding only existed for one year's worth of staff development, and the school chose other inservice priorities for the following year. The teachers are basically on their own after the one year, and without support, so further progress on staff development for cooperative learning would be up to each individual. Research shows that this is less than ideal, and progress tends to gradually fade away.

The teachers learned from the facilitators employed to lead the staff development, but they also learned from each other. They shared during the group sessions, and sometimes informally during breaks in the school day. They even learned by exchanging ideas during question and answer sessions with the evaluators, who were biased in favor of cooperative learning. As the evaluators, including this author, were hired by the inservice staff to conduct a formative evaluation, they were able to give feedback that may have slightly increased the success of the program, by passing along questions and needs to the inservice staff,

and occasionally sharing ideas or possible solutions with the teachers themselves. While evaluating the process, they also participated, and thus became a small part of the inservice program themselves, also helping to guide the teachers' improvement.

Conclusions

Current theory, research on effective school practices, and the logic of modeling a technique as an inservicing tool all argue in favor of using cooperative learning in staff development.

Regarding the initiation of inservice training, those interested should try to "sell" the program to all. Ideally, voluntary participation will involve the whole staff. Outside experts combined with school faculty can help synthesize theory with practice for needs assessments and implementation. Cooperative learning should be used to teach cooperative learning. Teachers should learn as they will teach. Careful planning should include creative ways to ensure that there is adequate time for the inservice sessions, as well as enough time to plan and prepare before implementation in the classrooms. This increases the likelihood of successful use, and therefore the willingness to participate and implement cooperative learning in the future.

Educational Importance

The study has relevance for any educators interested in pursuing effective staff development, either with cooperative learning as a process for supporting any inservice goal, or if cooperative learning is the topic itself. While this research included only elementary school teachers, both secondary school educators and university professors have found such staff development techniques useful.

Testing such applications with all groups more formally is a possible future research project.

The significance of this research lies both in its specific relevance for teaching cooperative learning techniques to any educators, and in the general value of following Vygotskian principles in helping educators of any age practice the value of learning from one another.

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